

Year in review: Best of the best



David Minton/DRC file photo

Cathy McMullen, president of the Denton Drilling Awareness Group, speaks Dec. 16 at a public hearing on amending the gas well drilling and production ordinance.

Staff picks those who stood out in interesting news year

Staff reports

They amazed us with tales of courage in the face of overwhelming odds, gripped our hearts with inspiring stories woven from the depths of tragedy and inspired us with dedication to their craft.

So this year, the *Denton Record-Chronicle* reporting staff decided to recognize local people who left a lasting impression. Selections were hard to make because we experienced so many inspiring, interesting and intriguing stories last year. Here are Denton County's 10 Most Interesting People for 2014.

Cathy McMullen

Cathy McMullen was tired of running. She'd been forced away from her 100-year-old farmhouse and a peaceful retirement by noxious fumes and thunderous noise of natural gas drilling.

But when she saw the telltale signs of hydraulic fracturing flags in Denton, she realized it was time for her to fight to save her neighbors and her city.

"We thought about moving again," McMullen told the *Record-Chronicle*. "[But] I thought if we move now, we would always be moving. We're

Related



Boring
Photo: Joe Luna

never going to get away from it.”

McMullen, 56, attended City Council meetings to oppose hydraulic fracturing, organized rallies and raised money for environmental testing. She joined with other residents and environmental activists, including Adam Briggie, an assistant professor at the University of North Texas, and Sharon Wilson of Earthworks to launch a campaign to ban drilling and hydraulic fracturing within city limits.

As oil and gas companies ramped up opposition to the ban, people began to wonder whether concerned residents could really win a battle against an industry with roots so thoroughly entrenched in the identity of Texas, especially when their own City Council refused to hear their voices.

The battle would cost both sides more than \$280,000.

In the end, McMullen and other residents' voices were heard. Voters approved the ban on drilling and hydraulic fracturing in city limits by a margin of 59-41 percent — a landslide.

“I finally took a breath because it was surprising that it passed with a big margin,” McMullen said. “The next day I realized the issue is changing from just a ban to protecting democracy and having local control because right away they began attacking the voters, saying it was all students, and started filing lawsuits to take away our control.”

McMullen was selected as a finalist for *The Dallas Morning News*' 2014 Texan of the Year.

— Christian McPhate

Joe Rivas

Joe Rivas is a Denton resident and a longtime advocate for Texans with disabilities. He has cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that can affect the motor systems and speech. Rivas uses a wheelchair, and has limited speech. He is a certified rehabilitation counselor and a professor who teaches at North Central Texas College through online, distance-learning programs.

Most recently, Rivas has been writing a series of books for young readers, *The Adventures of Willy Wilmer and His Cool Wheelchair*, about a young boy a lot like Rivas. Willy uses a wheelchair and has a stutter. With a lot of determination and a cast of characters who watch Willy adapt and succeed, the young hero makes his neighborhood a more inclusive place.



DRC_Esteban Rojas
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Photo: Courtesy
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Elise Clements stands in front of the Texas Normal College historical marker with a portrait of Beulah Ann Harriss. The Strickland Middle School seventh-grader was awarded the First Lady's Rising Star Award in September for her efforts to have a historical marker placed in Denton for Harriss.

Photo: Courtesy photo

Rivas shares the series of stories online at www.willywilmer.blogspot.com. Rivas continues to work on publishing his stories into a collection of children's books and hopes to see them in public school libraries.

— Cindy Breeding

Bing Burton

Bing Burton called it quits after 22 years as the Denton County health director.

During his time leading the health department, Burton and his staff managed to hire doctors, added an office in Lewisville and attained grants that enabled the office to expand without burdening taxpayers in Denton County.

"I have loved every minute of it," Burton told the *Record-Chronicle* in a phone interview. "Part of me wishes I was staying another 22."

Burton said one of his most memorable achievements occurred when he wrote a grant proposal to begin People's Clinic, which later became associated with Health Services of North Texas as a federally qualified health center.

Burton turned 66 years old in December, and he felt that it was time to retire.

"It's a good time to move on and see what other things are in store for me," he said. "I want to do some traveling, and my golf game needs a lot of work."

— Bj Lewis

Neal Smatresk

In February, Neal Smatresk started his job as president of the University of North Texas. Days later, severe financial mismanagement involving millions of dollars erupted into public view.

"This is a daunting list, but if we have a can-do attitude and we work as a team, we can change a lot," Smatresk said in his first State of the University address. "We can make it together, and it will be a better place as a result of it. I need your help. We need your support. We won't reach our hopes and dreams unless we can fix some of our operational challenges, and then we can correctively build a future together."



Burton
Photo: Al Key



Patsy Grube
Photo: Al Key



Steven Grube
Photo: Al Key

In 2014, Smatresk worked to engage the community in ways no previous president had attempted. He took selfies at graduation and sent email newsletters to the community about UNT’s achievements.

He has also started more significant changes at the university, including creating the Eagle Express Tuition plan, a fixed tuition program that pays students thousands of dollars if they graduate in four years.

For 2015, Smatresk will initiate the first ever Division of Student Enrollment and the first ever university-wide commencement ceremony in May.

— Jenna Duncan

Elise Clements

Elise Clements is a Strickland Middle School seventh-grader who was awarded the First Lady’s Rising Star Award in September. She earned the recognition for her efforts to have a historical marker placed in Denton for Beulah Ann Harriss. Miss Harriss, as she was known, was a longtime physical education teacher at UNT, a co-organizer for Denton’s first Girl Scout troop and founder of Green Jackets, a women’s service organization at UNT.

The Rising Star Award is awarded to youths 18 and younger for innovative and inspiring community service projects.

Clements efforts were part of a project for the Girl Scout Silver Award — the highest honor awarded to Girl Scout Cadettes for exhibiting skill, leadership and community service.

Clements’ efforts to bring recognition to Harriss’ contributions led to former Denton Mayor Mark Burroughs proclaiming Feb. 27 as “Miss Beulah Harriss Day” in Denton.

“You know the city’s built on a lot of pillars,” Burroughs told City Council in February. “Sometimes we forget them; sometimes people move on. But their legacy lives on and you see it with the spirit of young people who are still fulfilling the legacy that someone like [Harriss] created so long ago.”

The seventh-grader also nominated Harriss’ name to be considered for a future Denton ISD facility, and she intends to hold an annual Beulah Harriss Day event.

— Britney Tabor



Pearson
Photo: unknown



Rivas
Photo: Barron Ludlum/Staff
Photographer



Willingham
Photo: Courtesy photo

Steve and Patsy Grube

Steve and Patsy Grube of Justin epitomize grandparents' unconditional love. Every other week, they make a 1,400-mile trip from Denton County to Maryland to care for their granddaughters, Chrissy and Amanda, both of whom suffer a rare neurological disease known as giant axonal neuropathy, or GAN.

The disease first debilitates the legs, then the hands and eventually the lungs and digestive tracts. It leaves victims dependent on feeding tubes and ventilators before succumbing to early death.

"Waiting and watching," Patsy told the *Record-Chronicle* in October. "Chrissy wasn't a sickly child. She's happy, and when you see pictures of her, she's glowing. But she's slowly slipping away."

The Grubes are currently awaiting word if their granddaughters will be chosen for a new, experimental gene delivery drug that could possibly halt the disease's progression. They hope to hear news of their acceptance in January.

— Christian McPhate

Leslie Willingham

Denton County Sheriff's Deputy Leslie Willingham is an accomplished forensic artist. Her talent has brought her recognition throughout the United States. But Willingham is not interested in fame. She awaits the day she successfully identifies the victim of a fatal stabbing who put her on the path to becoming Texas' only certified peace officer who is also a forensic artist.

Before moving to Texas in 1992, Willingham came across the unidentified woman's case in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. This sad tale involving a lonely corpse lured her into forensic art. Now she is one of 32 forensic artists nationwide to be certified by the International Association for Identification.

"It's so sad that there is very little out there on this woman," Willingham told the *Record-Chronicle* in October.

Since then, Willingham's art has helped to solve thefts, nab an alleged rapist and even made headlines earlier this year when she reconnected a family to their 33-year-old son's remains, which had been unidentified for two years.



Smatresk
Photo: Al Key

“It always feels good when an investigator calls and says, ‘Yes, we have made an arrest,’” Willingham said.

But the homicide case that started it all — simply known as “The Rose” — still haunts her to this day, and she hopes one day to be given the chance to confront “her ghost.”

— Megan Gray-Hatfield

John “Sparky” Pearson

John “Sparky” Pearson oversaw one of the most significant renovations on the downtown Square in 2012 and 2013, when he and other co-owners opened Lone Star Attitude Burger. Now that the restaurant and music venue has been up and running for more than a year, Pearson is working on other projects to help develop the Square.

“This is a labor of love and taking care of our Square,” Pearson told the *Record-Chronicle*. “My dream was to start a business on the Square that will be here 50 years from now.”

Pearson continues to support the community. LSA Burger now sells the “Spirit of a Hero” burger platter. A share of the profits benefit a local foundation that sponsors veterans. He also helped other local businesses such as West Oak Coffee Bar get off the ground.

Pearson is currently working to open Barley & Board at the corner of Oak and Locust streets in the spring.

It will be the first brew pub and restaurant to appear downtown.

— Jenna Duncan

Esteban Rojas

Esteban Rojas became music director for Flower Mound Community Orchestras, and concerts under his direction have been the most successful in the orchestra’s history, according to the board of directors.

In addition, donations this year have tripled those of past years, and the number of those who’ve auditioned has jumped from eight to 30, with more experienced musicians now wanting to join the rejuvenated orchestra.

“I think that the energy and the love of the people that play in the orchestra are outstanding, and the level of commitment is unique,” Rojas said.

“When you work in that environment, the only result is excellence.”

Rojas has served as a principal conductor for more than 400 performances of wind symphonies in his native Colombia. He has guest-conducted some of the country’s major youth orchestra programs and conservatories.

He founded the Youth Symphony Orchestra of Fine Arts of Cali Conservatory at the Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes in 2005, one of the largest and most famous orchestras in his country.

Rojas has also conducted the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under Miguel Harth-Bedoya, the TCU symphony, the Fort Worth Youth Orchestra, the Las Colinas Orchestra, the Fort Worth Civic Orchestra, the Sinfonietta of Fort Worth and the Pan American Ensemble.

— Adam Schrader

Joshua Boring

Joshua Boring, a Denton High school junior, was recognized with the Texas School Nurses Association’s President’s Award on Nov. 15 in Houston. He was praised for his leadership in promoting Texas school nurses and the health for Texas school-age children.

“I would love it to be a law,” Boring told the *Record-Chronicle* in September.

“That would be my end result.”

In September, Boring received an all-expenses-paid trip to the nation’s capital after he won a contest sponsored by the Bill of Rights Institute that judged successful civic engagement projects.

He presented his project advocating for full-time nurses at every school in the country to U.S. Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Lewisville, and staff from Texas Sen. Ted Cruz’s office in Washington, D.C.

— Britney Tabor